Abstract

As we enter an era where living is subject to the challenges thrown by far-reaching changes, intensifying complexity, and growing interdependence, only people who are able to cope with the vicissitudes of change can survive. Our world has shifted away from an industrial society to a learning society. We now have more information than the collective minds in science can understand. An immediate goal of education therefore is to help students cope with these changes. Students in the new millennium must acquire the capacity to learn and adapt themselves to change consciously and continuously. It is the responsibility of schools to develop student knowledge, cognitive processes and intellectual dispositions to help them engage in effective problem solving, decision making, and lifelong learning.

In this context, the present study attempts to investigate the effectiveness of teaching thinking skills and dispositions as a distinct component in the ESL curriculum. The study also examines the impact of such instruction on the development of language skills.

The study begins with a discussion of various theoretical frameworks and taxonomies of cognitive development followed by a review of a few popular classroom strategies for teaching thinking. Further, a categorized list of thinking skills and dispositions is also presented for reference. This list was necessary given the inadequacy, to any extent, of the existing frameworks for teaching thinking. An intervention study was planned and undertaken to examine the development in thinking skills and dispositions as well as the development of language abilities when thinking is taught as a distinct component in the ESL curriculum.

The target group, thirty regional medium students of class IX, were given pre-intervention tasks, which included four tasks covering various skills and dispositions in the categorized list. Using the rubrics specifically designed for each task, the written responses were analyzed and assessed to arrive at the specific thinking skills and dispositions to be considered for the intervention. As a result, the target group received instruction in thinking skills and dispositions for about thirty hours spanning
eight weeks, after which, an Assignment with ten tasks was given covering all the skills and disposition taught in the intervention. This Assignment was given to capture the learning processes that had taken place in the intervention. Following this, a post-intervention assessment was done to assess development in language abilities in addition to thinking skills and dispositions. Then, the data from the tasks related to the Pre-intervention, the Assignment, and the Post-intervention were collected and sorted for analysis.

Since the aim of the study was to identify the development of thinking skills and dispositions through direct instruction, a comprehensive analysis of student performances across various phases of the study was necessary. Using qualitative methods of analysis, the written responses of these students for the tasks related to the Pre-intervention, the Assignment, and the Post-intervention were analyzed with respect to thinking skills, thinking dispositions, and language abilities.

The analysis indicated that teaching thinking had a positive impact on the development of thinking abilities and dispositions in students. The ability of the students to process information systematically improved substantially, which helped in the process of planning for task performance. There was a marked development in their ability to think critically about the information given. Students showed impressive improvement in skills like distinguishing between facts and opinions, and distinguishing between relevant and irrelevant information. They also improved with regard to metacognitive monitoring, which was evident in the better articulation of their cognitive processes while performing the tasks. Students clearly demonstrated an inquiring attitude in their task performance after the intervention. It was also noticed that they began to appreciate multiple perspectives related to an issue.

As far as language abilities are concerned, improvement in coherence and cohesion was documented in their planned performance of written responses. Use of cohesive devices such as 'because', 'so', 'and', and 'but' were picked up by the students, which was evident in their written responses and spoken interaction. However, in the case of some students, incorrect grammatical constructions were found in using the cohesive devices mentioned above. Students began using complete
sentences instead of fragments and phrases. Moreover, it was quite evident that the students began constructing their own sentences instead of copying the sentences from the input given. Students used more content words, though with spelling mistakes.

Informed by the study, a conceptual framework was developed for teaching thinking as a distinct component in the ESL curriculum. The constituents of the framework are described comprehensively. Further, an example from the study is also provided demonstrating how the framework functions in practice.

The findings from the study offer several implications for syllabus designers, material producers, and language teachers. Thinking needs to be taught as a distinct component in the ESL curriculum in addition to Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing. Syllabus designers ought to include thinking skills and dispositions in the syllabus documents. Thinking needs to be taught as explicitly as possible. Teachers need to use L1 and L2 strategically to cue the thinking processes of students. This will facilitate the transfer of thinking skills and dispositions to other subjects and situations in everyday contexts.